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Donald A. Miller

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A Vision of Family

by

Donald A. Miller, O.F.M., Ph.D.

The author received his doctorate in moral theology from the Catholic University of America. He is presently Assistant Professor of Theology at Walsh University, North Canton, Ohio.



Whether listening to talk radio, observing one of the many television interview shows, or watching the evening news, one is bound to encounter discussions concerning the American family and "family values." The frequency of these discussions points to the popularity of *family* as a present-day concern in our American culture. Unfortunately, these conversations often paint family life negatively by focusing almost exclusively on problems. This seems particularly true when the discussions are part of broader political considerations regarding health care and welfare reform. Issues such as the rising number of unwed mothers, the difficulties of single parenting, absent or abusive fathers, the present rate of divorce, concern for adequate and safe child care, and the like, top the discussion-topic chart. When the deliberations result in quick-fix solutions that sound good and appear politically correct, but do not address many deeper issues involved in today's familial situations, the picture grows even more bleak.

Two frequently ignored issues underlying many of today's familial discussions are the nature of the family and its essential role in society. I showed elsewhere that the Church's vision of family, as presented in various magisterial documents since Vatican II, provides a descriptive definition of the family as a God-given social institution whose primary social role is the education and socialization of

its members, especially its children. I demonstrated further that the definition can serve as an evaluate tool with which to appraise various familial structures and situations found in America today.¹ In this article I argue that the Church's vision of family introduces a note of hope and challenge into the broad social conversation concerning both the well-being of the family and the meaning of "family values." I will present this argument by first examining the main elements of the Church's descriptive definition of *family*, and then discussing how they offer both a challenge and hope.

Before presenting my argumentation, however, I wish to note two difficulties in interpreting the Church documents which, I believe, often lead to misunderstandings both within and without the Church membership. The first problem is that nowhere in the many writings about family do the magisterial authors present a concise, single-statement definition of *family*. What one finds are diverse discussions regarding various aspects of family and of familial life. The second difficulty is the perception that the Church has little more to say about *family* than its specific teachings regarding marriage and the proper use of sexuality within marriage. This is especially true when the authors so emphasize these latter issues that *family* and *marriage* appear almost coterminous. Such identification leads to an unfortunate de-emphasis of the other aspects of family; aspects which are essential to the full understanding of the Church's descriptive definition of family.

The Church's Vision of Family

In their discussion of the family, the conciliar bishops of Vatican II present and develop a theological anthropology derived from a traditional interpretation of the creation narratives found in Genesis. This anthropology views the human person as intrinsically social; a quality, the authors argue, that both reflects the inner life of the Triune God, and gives rise to various social structures, one of which is the family. In addition, the Council Fathers teach that male/female companionship — that is, marriage — creates the primary form of interpersonal communion.² As such, marriage serves as the root of the family.³

The bishops explain further that human sociability also evidences an interdependence between the individual and society. Human maturation requires many relationships of various types from conception until death.⁴ The most basic and fundamental interpersonal bonds are those established between an infant and his/her parents and siblings. Drawing from this fact, the conciliar authors assert that the family is the basic unit of society and the primary locus for the education and socialization of the human person.⁵ While these processes continue throughout the life stages, their primary expression is the rearing of the child in the cultural ways of society and Church from birth until adulthood. Because these familial duties fall primarily on the parents, and because they require both time and stability, the Council Fathers teach that a healthy marriage is the best environment for the nurturing of children and the well-being of their parents. Such a marriage, because it is an intimate partnership of life and covenantal love, uniquely affords the family the necessary internal and external stability needed to

fulfill its many-faceted social role.⁶

Popes Paul VI and John Paul II further developed the conciliar teaching in significant ways. Briefly, Paul VI underscored the fact that, while the family has a God-given role in human society, cultural expressions of the family and of its societal role are subject to social development.⁷ This insight allows for various familial models without "canonizing" any particular form. The nature of the family and its essential role within society take precedence over cultural expression. Second, the pontiff clearly asserted that the Christian family is an instrument of evangelization both for its own members and for society.⁸ Herein he built on the notion of the family as domestic church.⁹ Finally, Pope Paul offered in-depth considerations of the meaning of conjugal love in *Humanae Vitae*.¹⁰

The contributions of Pope John Paul II to the Church's vision of the family are scattered throughout his many writings. In the interest of brevity, I will examine two Apostolic Exhortations which contain his main thoughts: *Familiaris Consortio* and *Christifideles Laici*. His consideration of the family in the former may be described as an ecclesiology of the domestic church. He discusses four familial tasks each of which express the family's fundamental mission which, he asserts, is to share in God's love for humankind and Christ's love for the Church by guarding, revealing and communicating love.¹¹ The familial tasks are: (1) to form a community; (2) to serve life; (3) to participate in the development of society; and (4) to share in the life and mission of the Church.¹² The responsibility to form a community is the most significant task for therein the pontiff establishes the foundation for the other duties. He notes also that the formation of the familial community requires concerted effort; it does not just happen. This view clearly presupposes the need for that kind of stability and loving environment provided best by healthy marriage.¹³ He explains that the family's service of life refers primarily to the procreation and education of children, but should not be limited to that particular form of generativity, especially after the children have grown to adulthood and left home.¹⁴

The pope's discussion of the family's participation in the development of society and in the life and mission of the Church reveals his understanding of the nature of the family as the foundational and fundamental unit of both society and of the Church. Through the education and socialization of its members, the family contributes positively to the well-being and growth of society.¹⁵ As the domestic church, the family brings about the Kingdom of God through its basis in marriage and its sharing in Christ's priestly, prophetic and kingly mission derived from the baptism of each family member.¹⁶

Pope John Paul elaborates further on the family's duties to participate in society and the Church by noting the distinctly secular quality of the role of the laity in *Christifideles Laici*. His understanding of *secular* reflects the fact that the saving context within which the lay man or woman fulfills his/her baptismal consecration is "the world," and, more specifically, the family.¹⁷ Building further on the implication of the secular aspect of family life, John Paul also notes the importance of labor for the family by highlighting the necessity and sanctity of human work and the fact that the human person and the family must be the focus of work.¹⁸

The Church's Vision of Family as Hope and Challenge

Recognizing that the Church speaks to all nations and societies helps one better appreciate the lack of cultural specificity in its discussion of family life. The task of interpreting the abstract, general vision for a particular cultural situation falls on the local Church communities who participate in the regional social life of the culture. This interpretive task is an ongoing process; one that perhaps never ends because society continues to evolve. In this section I will discuss a few areas which, I believe, highlight that which the Church's vision of the family has to offer to our American national discussion concerning the family.

I begin with what may be obvious, but needs, nevertheless, to be restated because of its importance; namely, *each person is born into a family*. Due to any number of social, economic, cultural and political factors, the descriptive circumstances of that family may vary widely both within and among various societies. But, nevertheless, every child is born into a family. This reality forms the basis for the Church's teaching that the family is the foundational and fundamental unit of both society and the Church, and that the family needs the stability of a healthy marriage. As the basic unit of society, the family is responsible for the education and socialization of children so that they may learn the ways of the civil and ecclesial cultures and become productive members of each.

The further insight that the family is an institution derived from the social nature of humankind has many political, social, and ethical ramifications. For the biological family, it implies responsible parenthood. For society and the Church, it implies support and care for both parents and children so that the family can succeed in its tasks for the sake of the children, the good of the family as a social unit, and well-being of society and the Church. When the biological parents are unable to fulfill their duties in whole or in part, the responsibility for the rearing of children falls to other family members or society; a situation with multiple social, legal and ethical implications.

Second, the Church's vision of the family emphasizes the role of marriage as the root of the family. Today we are hearing more discussion about the psychological and social ramifications of children reared without both parents.¹⁹ But the Church takes the argument a step farther by noting that the physical presence of two is not enough. The good of the entire family is best served by a loving, healthy, stable marriage that alone can model covalent love for the children and afford the family a necessary stability. Recognizing that no marriage or family exemplifies the ideal perfectly, the Church nevertheless holds up its vision as both challenge and source of hope. The ideal challenges each member of the family — especially the adults — to strive toward growth by offering an understanding of what can be. Life and love can develop even in the face of human weakness and failure.²⁰

The Church's vision of family extends hope in several ways. First, it offers a strong statement to young people contemplating marriage and parenthood that these commitments are truly a sacred vocation. Second, it supports those working to ensure that marriage is respected in our culture as a preferred prerequisite for rearing children. Third, it encourages single parents and those in difficult family

situations to seek outside support for themselves as parents. As noted above, the Church's vision implies responsibilities for society and the Church community to augment parental duties when needed. Fourth, it emphasizes the sacred character of family and marriage as God-given gifts for the well-being. We are responsible for creating cultural expressions of the family that reflect Our national discussion of the family and "family values" will benefit also from the Church's insistence on the indissolubility of true marriages which make present both God's love for creation and the love of Christ for the Church. This teaching can offer motivation to married couples and help to counter the "throw-away" trend of our society. Marriage and the rearing of children need the support of a society that values healthy, stable marriages and takes positive steps to help couples maintain their marital relationships. The state and federal legislatures of our nation are already arguing the political, social and ethical ramifications of this situation. I suggest that the voice of the Church must remain a vital part of the conversation.

Finally, the Church's participation in the broad social discussion of the family raises a further issue concerning our nation's commitment to the separation of Church and State. We are a pluralistic society. But we are also a democratic society that respects the right of all opinions to be voiced and heard. The secular nature of the lay man and woman's baptismal calling emphasizes well the fact that the Church's voice is often best raised by those members of the Church who live marriage and family life. The hierarchy must teach the truths of the faith, but the laity are often the best qualified to implement those truths. This is perhaps why Pope John Paul II so clearly calls for the organization of family associations formed to address familial needs.²¹

Conclusion

The emphasis of post-Vatican II incarnational theology on the role of the laity and the sacredness of "the world," supports, I believe, my thesis that the Church's vision of the family can and should play a positive role in the broad social discussions concerning the well-being of the family and of "family values." I have argued that the Church's vision of *family* offers several insights that, when interpreted by the cultural situations of the American family, will benefit both marriage and family in our society. By maintaining the primacy of the family in the education and socialization of children, and by supporting the irreplaceable role of marriage as the root of the family, the Church both challenges family members to grow and offers hope that weakness and failure need not destroy the God-given institutions of marriage and the family. How our culture structures family life continues to change in light of other social developments. But, the essential social role of the family remains the same, and its fulfillment reflects upon the well-being of each individual and society itself.

References

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2. See Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (AAS 58:[1966]: 1025-1120), at nos. 12 and 25 (hereafter: GS). See also Walter Kasper, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 26. For other interpretations of the same scriptural sources see, for example, Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 45-58; Richard J. Clifford, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., "Genesis," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 11-12; and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 155-61.

3. See GS, no. 25; Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Lumen Gentium* (AAS 57 [1965]: 5-71) at no. 11 (hereafter: LG); and idem, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AAS 58 [1966]: 837-64) at no. 11 (hereafter: AA).

4. For a discussion of psychological development see Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968). Concerning moral development see Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and the discussions of Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), especially 95-99, 216-28, and 227-28; and Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 84-99.

5. See GS, nos. 25, 47 and 52. Concerning the teaching role of the family see Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gravissimum Educationis* (AAS 58 [1966]: 728-39), especially at nos. 1-6 (Hereafter: GE).

6. See GS, no. 48.

7. See Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (AAS 59 [1967]: 257-99), at no. 36 (hereafter: PP).

8. See Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (AAS 68 [1976]: 5-76), at nos. 70-72 (hereafter: EN).

9. See LG, no. 11; and AA, no. 11.

10. See Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (AAS 60 [1968]: 481-503) especially at nos. 8-10 (hereafter: HV). I recognize that Pope Paul VI's discussion of human sexuality in this encyclical has drawn much criticism and much support. While a consideration of either is clearly beyond the scope of this article, I would recommend the following works: M. John Farrelly, O.S.B., "The Principle of the Family Good," *Theological Studies* 31 (1970): 262-74; William E. May, *Sex, Marriage and Chastity: Reflections of a Catholic Layman, Spouse and Parent* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981), 69-93; Joseph A. Selling, "Moral Teaching, Traditional Teaching and Humanae Vitae," *Louvain Studies* 7 (1978): 24-44; and Joan Timmerman, "Sex, Sacred or Profane?" in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 8, Dialogue About Catholic Sexual Teaching*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 47-54.

11. See Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (AAS 74 [1982]: 81-191), at no. 17 (hereafter: FC).

12. See *ibid.*, nos. 17-64.

13. See *ibid.*, nos. 17-21.

14. See *ibid.*, nos. 28, 36 and 38. See also *ibid.*, no. 41 wherein the pontiff enumerates several life-giving and life-serving activities open to the family at various stages of development.

15. See *ibid.*, nos. 42-47.

16. See *ibid.*, nos. 49-63.

17. See Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (AAS 81 [1989]: 393-521), at no. 15 (hereafter: CL).

18. See Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (AAS 73 [1981]: 577-647), especially at nos. 10, 16 and 19 (hereafter: LE) and idem, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (AAS 80 [1988]: 513-86), especially at nos. 29-31 (hereafter: SR).

19. See, for example, Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children, *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of our Youngest Children* (Waldorf, MD: Carnegie Corporation of New

York, 1994).

20. For further discussion of the role of and need for ideals in life see Gilbert Meilaender, "A Christian View of the Family," in *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*, ed. David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain (Milwaukee: Family Service America, 1990), 133-48.

21. See, for example, *FC*, no. 72.
